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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENNAI 000045

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SUBJECT: ALLEGED "LOVE JIHAD" HEATS RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN SOUTH INDIA

REF: A) 09 Chennai 100, B) 09 Chennai 25, C) 09 Chennai 213, D) 08 Chennai 350

1. (U) Summary: An alleged conspiracy of "foreign-funded" Muslim men attempting to seduce, marry, and convert Hindu and Christian women, has led to state-level investigations and generated widespread suspicions in South India. The media has dubbed the so-called conspiracy a "Love Jihad," and top politicians in Karnataka and Kerala have found themselves forced to confront the issue publicly. Both Hindu and Christian groups have expressed fear and outrage at the "plot," while Muslim groups have felt the need to defend their co-religionists against the conspiracy theorists. Ongoing police investigations in South India have cast doubt on the existence of a "Love Jihad", but the recurring assertion of its existence despite contrary evidence demonstrates the suspicion and intolerance that exist among some of the religious communities in the region. The "Love Jihad" controversy has its origins in the coastal region of southern Karnataka and northern Kerala, where forms of religious and communal violence occur with unfortunate regularity (refs B, C, and D, among others). End Summary.

"Love Jihad" grabs the public's attention

2. (U) The alleged "Love Jihad," (sometimes also referred to as "Romeo Jihad") first seized widespread media attention in South India in September 2009, although some argue that the phenomenon has been going on for years. On September 29, 2009, Kerala's High Court issued an order for police to investigate the cases of two college-aged girls allegedly forced to convert to Islam after marrying Muslim men. Stories spread of an organized plan by groups of Muslim men to get Hindu and Christian women to fall in love with them. Reports alleged that the men were given allowances by unidentified (but ostensibly foreign) sources to woo the women, marry them, and subsequently force them to convert. (Note: Arranged marriages are still the norm throughout India. Western-style betrothals -- known as "love marriages" in India -- are increasingly common in urban areas, but are still the exception. End note.)

3. (U) While the Kerala Director General of Police has since reported that there is no evidence of a "Love Jihad" or "Romeo Jihad" organization, some members of the police, politicians, and both Hindu and Christian religious groups continue to suspect that "forced conversions" (ref A) are occurring, and that the culprits are receiving foreign funding for their efforts. (Comment: The accusers, often leaders of Hindu nationalist outfits like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), speak in generalities about foreign funding for the "Love Jihad," and fail to provide any

credible evidence of foreign involvement. End comment.)

Serial killer vs. Love Jihad

¶4. (U) The issue picked up steam in the neighboring state of Karnataka in early October, when several Hindu nationalist, Sangh Parivar groups claimed that a young woman named "Anitha," missing since June, was a "Love Jihad" victim. Local police cast some doubt on this claim when they announced on October 21 that "Anitha" had been the victim of a serial killer, arrested earlier that day, who had confessed to poisoning her and 17 other women. According to the press, a police official who wanted to remain anonymous reportedly said that he hoped the cracking of the "Anitha" case would "put an end this 'Love Jihad' controversy once and for all." An hour after the police announcement, however, Karnataka's High Court ordered an investigation into the "Love Jihad," forcing the state's police to continue to commit personnel and resources toward investigating the alleged conspiracy.

True love or Love Jihad?

¶5. (U) The October 21 Karnataka High Court's decision to investigate another "Love Jihad" case, in response to a petition filed by the parents of a young woman who converted to Islam after marrying a Muslim man, further buttressed the conspiracy theory in the minds of many in South India. After the marriage, the parents allege that the girl was confined to a madrasa and forced to study Islam. These allegations of "Love Jihad" led authorities to classify the problem as a potential national security issue; the Karnataka High Court,

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for example, wrote that the case had to be investigated because "issues of national security" were involved, including the unlawful trafficking of women and girls. (Note: The woman in this case subsequently defended her marriage in court and said that her conversion was of her own free will and accused her parents of being "mentally unstable." End note.)

Religious groups fanning the flames

¶6. (SBU) Both Hindu and Christian groups in South India are publicizing stories of "Love Jihad." The Commission for Social Harmony and Vigilance of the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council (KCBC) reported that there had been 2,868 female victims of the "Love Jihad" in Kerala from 2006-09. The Commission made several recommendations to parents through its newsletter, including a recommendation to monitor children's mobile phones and computers, to fight this "social evil." We met with Dr. Sajan K. George, National President of the Global Council of Indian Christians, who was convinced that there was a concerted effort in South India by Muslim men to get Christian women to fall in love with them in order to convert them. He said that his organization was publicly tight-lipped about the incidents because it did not want to exacerbate religious tensions in Kerala and Karnataka, which he said were already high. Dr. George said that his group found it necessary, however, to warn Christian parents and young girls of the danger posed by the "Love Jihad" so that they can be better prepared to resist what many call "charming" young Muslim men involved in the scheme.

¶7. (U) The Sri Ram Sena, a Hindu extremist group responsible for a number of violent incidents in Karnataka, (ref C) announced plans to develop "education programs" for women to help them avoid being trapped by what it calls "nefarious Romeos." On January 24 at a public rally in Mangalore, the national president of the Bajrang Dal (a Hindu extremist group), Prakash Sharma, reportedly told the crowd that "Love Jihad" was a ploy to make Hindu women servants of Muslim men and deprive Hindu boys of "their share of women for procreation."

¶8. (U) More mainstream Hindu nationalist organizations have also fueled the fire. The "Organiser", an official publication of the RSS, published an article in its January 3 edition entitled,

"Sisters, Beware of the Stupid Love Terror!" which incorporates a wide range of charged, but thinly sourced, allegations. One such allegation is that although police officials in Kerala have reported officially that they have found no evidence of an organized "Love Jihad," many senior police officers remain privately concerned about groups like "Smart Front." According to the article, this organization is a Muslim group operating in Muslim institutions "to promote love affairs" with upper-caste Hindu and Christian women, particularly those "studying in professional colleges or working in the information technology (IT) sector."

¶9. (U) These allegations have forced some in the Muslim community in Southern India to issue public denials of the existence of any sort of "Love Jihad" conspiracy. The Muslim Central Committee of Karnataka's Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts have publicly denied that a "Love Jihad" exists and emphasized that their faith does not condone forced conversion. According to press reports, some Muslim leaders, including Committee President K.S. Mohammed Masood, have alleged that accusations of a "Love Jihad" are an attempt by certain groups to further blacken the image of the Muslim community. He emphasized that Islam allows for no concept like "Love Jihad" and that "forces are trying to divide Muslims and Hindus by coining the phrase 'Love Jihad' in an attempt to destabilize peace in society and Muslim-Hindu unity."

Statistics suggest lack of evidence for Love Jihad

¶10. (U) The media and some religious groups have been fueling the hysteria by making vague statements about large numbers of missing young women in Karnataka over the last six years, suggesting that these disappearances are related to the "Love Jihad." Multiple Hindu extremist groups held a rally at Mangalore's district headquarters on October 15, alleging that over 3,000 Hindu girls from the region and more than 30,000 from the rest of the state had gone missing since the alleged launch of the "Love Jihad" in 2008, figures that were reportedly repeated on the websites of various

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Hindutva organizations. Other Hindutva-leaning groups and individuals have suggested the number of missing Hindu girls ranges from 3,000 to 4,000.

¶11. (U) Police in Karnataka have attempted to shed light on the apparently wildly exaggerated allegations of missing women. Official statistics reportedly show that 404 women were reported missing in 2009, and that police tracked down 332 of them. A local police superintendent told the press that there were only 57 women currently missing in his district, and that he suspected most of them had "committed suicide or eloped."

Official report due in March

¶12. (U) Karnataka's High Court granted the state's government on January 19 six more weeks to submit a final investigation report on the existence of a "Love Jihad" movement in the state. Karnataka's Deputy Inspector General of Police, Malini Krishnamurthy, is heading the probe and has constituted a special team to investigate the matter, demonstrating the seriousness with which the Karnataka police are treating "Love Jihad" allegations. The final report is expected during the first week of March.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) While it may be easy for outsiders to ridicule the "Love Jihad" allegations, the fact that they have gained so much traction in the popular imagination illuminates the very real paranoia and social tensions that sometimes exist in relationships among Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in the region. In some areas, it would be hugely embarrassing for Hindu parents to reveal to friends and relatives that their daughter has fallen for a Muslim man, and the hypothesized existence of a nefarious, foreign-funded organization that targets innocent Hindu women likely makes it easier for the parents to explain to themselves and others what has happened.

¶14. (SBU) The "Love Jihad" brouhaha also illustrates the perceived threat that many Hindus in the region feel from "forced conversions," (ref A) and the general encroachment of "alien" religious forces into what they see as a Hindu religious space. These perceptions -- and the related tensions -- will likely continue regardless of the content of Karnataka's official report on the alleged "Love Jihad." End Comment.

SIMKIN